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A woman leads environmental activists in a climate protest in Kinshasa, Congo, in November

A woman leads environmental activists in a climate protest in Kinshasa, Congo, in November 2019. As they mark the Season of Creation, Catholics in Africa celebrate the Congo Basin as the second "lung" of the Earth. (CNS photo/Hereward Holland, Reuters)

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NAIROBI, Kenya — September 23, 2021
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As they marked the Season of Creation, Catholics in Africa celebrated the Congo Basin as the second "lung" of the Earth and called for its protection to fight climate change.

The celebrations in an online conference focused on the work of the Ecclesial Network for the Congo River Basin (REBAC), a Catholic network that includes Cameroon, Congo, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Central African Republic.

"The Congo Basin — a major geographic region rich biodiversity — is very important not only for Africa, but the entire world," Prince Papa, coordinator of the Laudato Si'

Movement in Africa, told Catholic News Service. "We must ensure that it is protected because many creatures and creation depend on it."

Speakers during the online conference reiterated support for Indigenous people as custodians of biodiversity, highlighted the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change and their interconnectedness, and spoke against the rapid deforestation occurring in the Congo Basin. They also called for an end to oil exploration and the protection of Virunga National Park in Congo.

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Henri Muhiya Musabate, executive secretary of Congo's Episcopal Commission on Natural Resources, told the virtual conference that most national budgets in Congo Basin countries are funded through mining, oil and forestry, but such activities were harming the countries and the people.

"Extractive incomes are not profitable to populations and to the development of countries," Musabate said.

Most of the countries are in poverty, he added, and experience armed conflicts over access to natural resources. He also highlighted illicit arms sales, weak governance and forced migration, among other challenges.

The effects of climate change are visible in the Congo Basin, Musabate said, citing increased flooding, droughts, disruption of seasons and rising temperatures.

He said people must learn how to convince countries in the Congo Basin to stop exploiting hydrocarbons to fund their budgets and how to fight hunger by reducing the areas farmed by families living in the forests.

People make their way through a flooded street after heavy rains in Douala, Cameroon, Aug.

People make their way through a flooded street after heavy rains in Douala, Cameroon, Aug. 12. Catholics in Africa are calling for greater protection of the Congo Basin to fight climate change. (CNS photo/Joel Kouam, Reuters)

Rita Mabyalhat, head of transparency programs for the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Pointe-Noire, Republic of Congo, said several

measures have been put in place by governments and international organizations to protect the basin's wetlands from degradation, drainage and drying up due to human activities and mining.

These include a cross-border agreement between the Republic of Congo and Congo on the importance of good land use and planning of infrastructures, and initiatives to speed up conservation, restoration and sustainable management of wetlands.

But she warned, "Even if the Congolese authorities reaffirm their concern to preserve the places, the growing economic needs of the two Congos and the lack of alternatives for the people of the Congo Basin raise fears of an uncertain future for the wetlands."

The Season of Creation is an annual ecumenical event during which Christians join to pray and act together for the Earth. The theme of this year's event is "A Home for All? Renewing the *Oikos* of God." Oikos is a Greek word that roughly translates to home or family.

The virtual conference is taking place ahead of two major environment-related U.N. events.

The U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity will begin with a virtual event Oct. 11-15 and conclude with face-to-face meetings in Kunming, China, April 25 to May 8, 2022. Meanwhile, the 26th U.N. Climate Change Conference (COP26) will be held Oct. 31 to Nov. 12 in Glasgow, Scotland.

During the biodiversity conference, world leaders will review the progress on the international Convention on Biodiversity. In Glasgow, countries will announce their plans to meet the goals of the Paris climate agreement, in an effort to drastically cut greenhouse gas emissions and slow global warming.

Catholics in Africa are urging world leaders to tackle the climate change emergency and the biodiversity crisis together. They also want action to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius and a promise that there will be no more biodiversity loss.

"It is our responsibility as Catholics to lift up the voices of the most vulnerable and advocate on their behalf. We must act now," said a petition released by Laudato Si' Movement.